CHAPTER 8

Epilogue

The key to interpreting Empedocles' thought lies in dismissing the dualism between Empedocles the rational philosopher and Empedocles the religious mystic, considering instead his work as a unified whole in which religion, myth and philosophy are deeply interconnected. Most Empedoclean interpreters today would endorse this view. Yet only very few effectively attempt to combine his concept of rebirth with the cosmological account and thus acknowledge the former as a positive doctrine within his physics. The preceding chapters have endeavoured to do precisely this, namely to show the ways in which the details of Empedocles' doctrine of rebirth are consistent with, and profoundly implied in, the structure of his physical system. Thereby the doctrine of rebirth has been proven to be a positive doctrine within his physics. Indeed, it not only interacts with and often illuminates Empedocles' more strictly physical principles, but has also been shown to be in some respects a premise for his physics.

By presenting this argument, I have aimed to offer a new perspective highlighting that Empedocles' philosophical project in *On Nature* was primarily designed as the pathway to escape rebirth, transcend mortal nature and become divine. The philosophical explanation of the nature of things contained in it is seen as a method, albeit a privileged one, to reach this end. Thereby, the investigation carried out throughout this book has established that concerns about the place and destiny of human beings in this world, claims to disembodied existence, individual identity and personal survival among many deaths and different lives as well as concerns for purity and human moral agency are central to the structure of Empedocles' physical system and are therefore essential for our genuine comprehension of it.

In setting out this main argument, the enquiry presented in this book has thus been divided into three parts. The first part, consisting of Chapters 1 and 2, has reconstructed a new textual basis to rethink the interaction among myth, religion and natural philosophy in Empedocles'

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physical system. Through a re-evaluation of the location of some fundamental verses related to Empedocles' guilt, punishment, exile and rebirth within the proem to *On Nature*, we could appreciate that Empedocles' physical poem is constructed around a synergy of mythical motifs and religious interests, as well as more strictly physical theories. First, *On Nature* begins with Empedocles' claim to divine nature and the narration of his extraordinary *katabasis* to the underworld, which principally serve the poet to claim authorial legitimation on matters well beyond ordinary human ken. Second, by reconstructing the sequence of the proemial fragments following Empedocles' mythical *katabasis* to the reign of the dead, we have seen that themes and motifs related to the doctrine of rebirth are not confined to the narration of his journey to Hades but are programmatically scattered throughout the whole proemial section. Moreover, the way in which Empedocles introduces one of the principal tenets of his physics – his unconditional rejection of birth and death based on the concept that nothing comes to be from or perishes into nothing – suggests that this is directly related to, indeed it seems to be premised on, his more religious belief that there is something of the individual that predates the birth and outlasts the death of the present mortal body. This indicates that Empedocles regarded the doctrine of rebirth as closely interwoven with his natural philosophy, which consequently prompts us to investigate the former as a positive doctrine of his physical system.

The second part of this book, consisting of Chapters 3 and 4, has set out an exploration and clarification of pivotal notions translating the Empedoclean conception of godhood and has investigated them in relation to his concept of rebirth. The principal aim of this analysis has been to provide the linguistic and conceptual tools for a detailed understanding of Empedocles' doctrine of rebirth so as to then work out a way to reconcile it with the principles and theories of his natural philosophy. More specifically, Chapter 3 has delved into the key-concept of *daimon*, showing that, in contrast to standard interpretations, in the demonological fragments Empedocles did not construct a story that is aimed to represent, in mythical terms, the post-mortem destiny of our own soul. Rather, Empedocles meant therewith to build his own demonology which, just like that of his master Pythagoras, is bound to, but does not overlap, with his doctrine of rebirth. Chapter 4 has then focused on diverse concepts that are explicitly characterized as divine in Empedocles' physical system, with the aim to tackle two controversial issues: to establish what can be considered as divine in his physics (and why) and, accordingly, to understand what the 'divine reward' promised to the initiates into his philosophy

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means in his physical system. As we have seen, Empedocles has a heterogeneous notion of 'godhood' regarding the four elements, Love and Strife or the Sphairos; yet the divine nature promised after release from rebirths is based on the divine nature of the Sphairos, the ideal of perfection and godhood of Empedocles' system. This entails the choice for Love in contrast to Strife as well as, accordingly, a long, harmonious and stable life, supreme happiness and genuine knowledge.

In carrying out this background work, I laid the necessary foundations for a clearer understanding of Empedocles' philosophical programme, while establishing a conceptual infrastructure from which to reconcile the details of Empedocles' notion of rebirth with the principles of his physics. In the third part of this book (i.e., Chapters 5, 6 and 7), I analyzed the ways in which Empedocles' physics is consistent with his religious interests in rebirth and purification, concluding that the latter are integral to his physical system. In fact, in some cases the concept of rebirth seems to be a premise, indeed a structuring factor, of his physical principles and theories.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 demonstrate Empedocles' doctrinal unity from different perspectives. First, questions of disembodied existence, individual identity and personal survival among many deaths and diverse lives prove central to his physical system (Chapter 5). Second, true knowledge of the physical world is made the way to escape rebirths, transcend one's mortal nature and become divine, while in parallel a process of purification is the essential condition to receive and genuinely understand the nature of things (Chapter 6). Third, the cosmic cycle, with its ethical import and its emphasis on moral responsibility, is the ideal backdrop for Empedocles' doctrine of rebirth; indeed, the cosmological narrative shows that the physical system is not merely consistent with, but seems to be premised on his belief in rebirth (Chapter 7). The result is a 'new Empedocles', that is, a fresh and original reading of his thought that has offered a way, paraphrasing Warren's statement,[1] to marry Empedocles' religious concerns with his more strictly physical interests.

To this end, in Chapter 5, by exploring a group of fragments that I allocated in the final section of Empedocles' proem to *On Nature*, it has been established not merely that, contrary to mainstream interpretations, his concept of rebirth functions within his physical system, but that

[1] Warren (2007: 147) pointed out that, when reconstructing Empedocles' thought, the real difficulty is not to consider his religious interests as part of his physics, but rather lies 'in attempting to marry the details of the daimon's story with the cosmological accounts'.

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Empedocles constructs one of his central physical theories with his doctrine of rebirth in mind. By picking up an argument I already worked out in Chapter 2 – that Empedocles' unconditioned rejection of the notions of birth and death is articulated according to his more religious belief in rebirth – in this chapter my investigation succeeded in showing that the way in which Empedocles illustrates the cycle of rebirths of individual persons displays striking analogies with his conception of elemental changes forming mortal bodies, with both processes being depicted as *body transformations* and recalling the conceptual domain of metamorphosis. This analogical language, moreover, suggests that the physical principles and the concept of rebirth are strictly related and mutually enlightening.

Moreover, I was able to show that traditional readings claiming that Empedocles' physics contradicts the notion of personal survival upon death and, therefore, cannot accommodate his concept of rebirth are inherently wrong. Instead, although Empedocles seems to have felt no need to develop a complex theory of the soul as the seat of a person, I have demonstrated, first, that he nonetheless has a notion of the soul which accords with his natural philosophy. Indeed, he has a traditional, Homeric concept of soul that can not only sustain the idea of disembodied existence, but can also be adapted to the principles of his physics. Consequently, and second, by disentangling Empedocles' conception of the soul and rebirth from what, basically, are variations of a Platonic/Platonizing paradigm, I was able to show that concerns on disembodied existence and personal survival from one life to another are not just added to his physical theories but are in fact foundational to the principles of his natural philosophy.

Having set out the centrality in Empedocles' physics of such 'religious' concerns, in Chapter 6 I have embarked on an investigation into the weight that knowledge of the physical world plays in the liberation from rebirths and consequently in the process of divinization. Contrary to received interpretations that see Empedocles' natural philosophy as an end in itself or that, while acknowledging religious aspects of his physics, do not explore the possibility of a deeper interconnection among them, my approach in this chapter has instead explored the mutual impact that the physical and religious aspects of Empedocles' thought have on each other. Thereby I was able to work out a twofold outcome successfully proving Empedocles' doctrinal unity.

First, I have shown that, according to Empedocles, genuine understanding of the nature of things changes people's minds; that is, concretely, it

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affects the mixing of elements in the body and thereby enables a change in the person's being from a mortal to a divine nature. The prospect of this change is explained by Empedocles within his theories of perception, thought and knowledge acquisition, which are conceptualized as physiological processes ultimately depending on the elemental *krasis* of pericardial blood. According to Empedocles, external conditions, to which we are constantly exposed, change the *krasis* of elements in our blood, thereby altering the quantity and quality of individual thinking and knowledge. Thus, when confronted with the 'right' external conditions and epistemic inputs, people can improve their mind and its cognitive potential. Accordingly, Empedocles argues that the confrontation with, and assimilation of, the true nature of things he is revealing is able to change the potential of the human mind to the level that it can perceive, think and know as a god.

The second result reached by my investigation in Chapter 6 consists in having demonstrated that Empedocles' interests in purificatory and abstinence rules are thought to affect our approach, reception and understanding of the physical world. While purifications are generally considered merely as a means to escape rebirths, I have instead highlighted that, according to Empedocles, they are also a necessary condition to gain genuine knowledge of the physical world. Indeed, confronting (and listening to) a true explanation of the nature of things is not sufficient *per se* to change one's own being, if the person's mind is not prepared to receive and assimilate it. Therefore, because our dedication to ordinary solicitudes will eventually blunt our thoughts and diminish our cognitive potential, Empedocles recommends that we undergo a process of purification to maintain a high level of commitment and disposition towards the things that really matter; that is, the nature of things and our place within them. In this way, right and utterly important matters of this sort will take hold in, and increase, our mind as well as produce new thoughts and knowledge to the point of divine wealth.

Having so far explored different perspectives from which we can appreciate how Empedocles' religious interests are reconciled with the principles of his physics, Chapter 7 takes this direction a step further by analyzing the extent to which Empedocles' doctrine of rebirth is consistent with, and fits into, his cosmic cycle. To begin, I have devised a way to tackle the long-standing puzzle of reconstructing the process of rebirth within the cosmic change between two consecutive Sphairoi. Scholars have generally interpreted the cycle of rebirths (or, more precisely, the demonic cycle) and the cosmic cycle, by virtue of the striking similarities between them, as analogical

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accounts that are constructed in a kind of loose unity, thus relegating the doctrine of rebirth to a purely mythical level of expression that should not be regarded as a positive doctrine. In contrast, I have been able to show that Empedocles' concept of rebirth is not a merely mythical variant of his cosmological narrative but is, in fact, a central aspect in his cosmic cycle.

Through a fresh metaphor analysis, I have also been able to show that Empedocles envisaged our world as an everlasting battle between Love and Strife alternately gaining the upper hand and temporarily achieving blissful or sorrowful reigns and ages. Whereas the present age is at the hands of Strife, genitor of our miserable human race, in the past Love achieved the formation of a 'golden' age and the generation of 'gods greatest in honour'. The reconstruction of Love's theogony in our world means that gods' vicissitudes take part within the history of our world. Moreover, it has been argued that the cosmic conflict between Love and Strife results, at the level of the microcosm, in the opposition between gods living a long life and humans dying many times – which means that the antithesis between immortality and mortality/rebirths is played out in the cosmic cycle. In other words, the analysis put forward here is substantial evidence that Empedocles' belief in rebirth is foundational to, and consequently profoundly intertwined with, his physical system.

Furthermore, the interrelation between the cosmic cycle and doctrine of rebirth has also been explored in terms of the relationship between Love's and Strife's roles in the universe and in the story of the individuals. My investigation has shown that Empedocles' cosmic cycle is not morally neutral, but rather loaded with ethical import. This conclusion is doubly significant for the main argument of this book. First, the elements of clear moral value that characterize Empedocles' narrative of the cosmos serve him to construct the perfect physical backdrop for his concept of rebirth. Indeed, the belief that our earthly existence is a disgrace, that our race is pitiful, and that the world in which we live is a horrible place from which we should flee as soon as possible seems to motivate and structure the physical theory of a world and a human race that are the result of the violent assault of Strife against Love, the principle of good.

Second, the ethical import of Empedocles' narrative of the cosmos emphasizes the weight of human moral agency and responsibility. Contrary to the general view according to which the cosmic cycle leaves no room for moral choices, I have argued that these not only affect the individual destiny of rebirth or release, but also determine, on a larger scale, the development of the tug-of-war between Love and Strife and, consequently, the shape of the world. This proves that Empedocles sees humans

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as active parts of a broader universe and their moral actions as having large-scale effects on the shape of the world. On the whole, the final picture that emerges from my reading of Empedocles' cosmic cycle shows the deep synergy on different levels between his physics and doctrine of rebirth, thus establishing substantial evidence of the doctrinal unity of his thought.

From a methodological point of view, the interpretation presented here, while having tried to remain faithful to the extant fragments and *ipsissima verba* and to refrain from reading into them modern reconstructions, has succeeded in shedding light on new standpoints to look at long-standing problems. In this regard, I have systematically questioned received opinions and outdated notions, whether they are derived from modern interpreters or even from ancient authors, and I have endeavoured to look at old questions with fresh eyes. In this way, in addition to a new textual reconstruction of the proem to the physical poem, I have offered new insights into fundamental concepts of Empedocles' thought, such as a new conception of the *daimon*, a novel reconstruction of his concept of the soul and personal survival, an original interpretation of his concept of rebirth as a series of bodily transformations, up to a different reconstruction of the double zoogony and the cosmic cycle and an innovative analysis of his narrative of the cosmos as loaded with moral import.

Yet, even so, much remains to be done for a comprehensive understanding of Empedocles' thought, and thus many questions remain open. For instance, while my book has focused on the Empedoclean concepts of birth, death and, above all, rebirth as pivotal cases to evaluate the interconnection between religion and philosophy, much still needs to be done concerning the Empedoclean notion of 'life'. We might still ask what does it mean to be alive in Empedocles' thought? What defines the notion of a 'living being'? And what motivates Empedocles' ranking of all forms of life? Moreover, while a major focus of this study has concerned the reconstruction of Empedocles' doctrine of rebirth, it still remains to be assessed what role it played in the formation and development of the belief of metempsychosis in the Graeco-Roman world. In this respect, a systematic investigation of the literature and scholarship on the topic would help evaluate both Empedocles' debt to similar earlier beliefs and his legacy on later doctrines of rebirth.

Another aspect that still awaits thorough investigation concerns Empedocles as a poet. Throughout this book, many elements of Empedocles' poetry have been analyzed – most notably his pervasive and brilliant use of metaphors – while often comparing his verses with other works by epic, didactic or philosophical poets, such as Homer, Hesiod and

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Parmenides. Yet, in order to have a picture of Empedocles' work and thought, as well as of the man himself, that is as complete as possible, it is also necessary to consider his work in relation to other forms of poetry; for instance, the lyric poetry of Pindar and Bacchylides, as well as to the coeval tragic poetry.

Similarly, the results drawn by this book may offer a methodological approach to explore other open questions of Empedocles studies, overthrow the 'tyranny' of old and unchallenged dogmas and thereby open the pathway for genuinely innovative outcomes. In particular, this book has often applied metaphor analysis to revise some of Empedocles' most controversial concepts – ranging from the concept of rebirth to his cosmological representation. In doing so, I believe I have shown that an investigation of this sort is highly productive to achieve new perspectives from which we can explore central philosophical concepts, while dismantling received notions. As Empedocles made extensive use of metaphors to illustrate the notions and principles of his physics, a study of this kind can be pursued more systematically to investigate further concepts his philosophy made use of and thereby revise other aspects and areas of his thought.

Most fundamentally, my reconstruction of Empedocles' thought and the methodological standard of my study may provide an interpretative key to approach and re-assess the character and aims of the thought of other early Greek thinkers who display analogous interests to Empedocles – including, but not limited to, authors such as Heraclitus, Parmenides and the Derveni author. In fact, I believe that the re-evaluation of Empedocles' philosophy put forward here turns out to offer a real challenge to our modern idea of fifth-century natural philosophy and could therefore provide us with a unique basis on which to fully rethink its nature and aims. Whereas early Greek philosophy is generally identified with the philosophy of *nature*[2] in contrast to a philosophy of the *human*, as later practised by Socrates and Plato,[3] a major result of this book is to have demonstrated that Empedocles is concerned, in the first instance, with humans' pragmatic approach to the world – what is our place here, what

[2] Driven, as Laks puts it, by the intention to depict a universal history of the world and its constitutive parts and thus including, in short, 'a cosmogony and a cosmology, a zoogony and a zoology, and anthropology and physiology (in the modern sense of the term), which under certain circumstances could also be continued as a history of human civilization' (2018: 5).

[3] Early Greek philosophy has been described as a philosophy of nature (or Presocratic naturalism) in contrast to a philosophy of human, initiated by Socrates (or Socratic humanism). This interpretation of the development of Greek philosophy is already given by ancient authors, as Warren (2007: 2–3) and above all Laks (2018: 2–18) show.

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we should make of our life and how we should face the prospect of death. As we have seen, the universal history of the physical world he implemented in *On Nature* is in function of this pragmatic approach, ultimately being the privileged method through which initiates could change their nature from mortal to divine beings.

In this respect, while scholars have long recognized that concerns in ethics, epistemology and theology characterize many early Greek thinkers, my book has essentially focused on the extent to which these are not just added to interests in natural philosophy but are instead thoroughly interconnected with, and often constitute a fundamental premise to the physical principles. In other words, I have been able to show the central, structuring character of Empedocles' religious interests to his physical system; that is, the foundational role, in his philosophy, of claims to disembodied existence and personal survival upon death, concerns for human moral agency and purity as well as aspirations to immortality and divinization. Moreover, my analysis has also highlighted the weight and role that knowledge of the physical world plays for more pragmatic purposes. In this regard, the present investigation may have offered the first steps towards a genuine rethinking of early Greek philosophy as a profound synergy between the *nature* and the *human*. Consequently, I hope that it may contribute to a wider, fresh reconsideration of its proper dimension and of the weight of its legacy in the history of ancient thought.

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